

1859

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THIS BOOK PRESENTED BY
Francis Newton Thorpe

RELIGION AND POLITICS

A

DISCOURSE

DELIVERED IN THE

FIRST CONGREGATIONAL UNITARIAN CHURCH

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BY

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DISCOURSE

LUKE XII. 48.

UNTO WHOMSOEVER MUCH IS GIVEN, OF HIM WILL BE MUCH REQUIRED.

I LISTENED a few evenings ago, my friends, to an affecting recital of the sufferings and struggles of the people of Italy, a people given up a prey and a spoil to foreign and domestic despots. As the horrors of those prisons into which the noble men, still produced by that renowned land, have been thrown, were unveiled; as it was related how the prisoners were chained together hand and foot without respite for long years and subjected to tortures so cruel, that families residing in the neighborhood moved away to be beyond the hearing of the shrieks which those tortures called forth; when we were not only told of the immediate victims of this hellish tyranny, but were reminded also of the parents and children, of the wives, sisters and brothers of the victims, forbid-

den all access to them, and forced in utter helplessness to bear this sharp distress,—as all this indescribable misery was presented to our minds, what a gross insult did it seem to all human intelligence and human feeling, to call the sacred idea of Human Rights a political subject, having nothing to do with Religion! Offensive as it appears in view of such a recital, this representation is constantly and boldly made. And at this very hour, there are multitudes assembled for Christian worship over all this land of boasted light, who consider any allusion on this day in our temples of Religion, to the great interests of human Freedom or to the wrongs of Slavery as a departure from the religious uses of the Sabbath and the Church, and a downright desecration of both.

If it were indeed so, if it were a fact that Religion has nothing to do with human liberty, that it is no business of hers, whether human beings breathe God's free air, with the free use of their God-given limbs and thoughts, or whether they are confined in dungeons, lacerated by physical tortures, wounded by chains and whips, and driven to the shambles like cattle to be sold or slaughtered—if this is a matter with which Religion has no concern, then Religion has nothing to do with the dear Cause of Human Happiness; and it is worth neither the time nor the

trouble that we take to maintain it in the world. Instead of being a matter of the deepest moment, it is childish trifling, unworthy of the attention of earnest and active men. How could we attach any value to Religion or Religious Institutions, if, in a religious point of view, it were a matter of entire indifference, whether men were acting the murderous part of oppressors, trafficking in human flesh, or were suffering the miserable doom of slaves, and if, when men were chained and tortured and slain by their despots, Religion had no word of condemnation to utter, no cry of sympathy!

But, friends, it tasks one's patience to argue this point. How can I bear to insult your intelligence and your humanity by implying that you need to have it made clear to you that Religion, speaking through her appointed teachers, has a right to denounce oppression in every form, public and personal! Has a right, do I say? Has a right! It is its plainest duty,—a necessity is laid on us, if we would not betray the Religion we profess to the bitter scorn of the world,—a necessity is upon us, to condemn the wickedness which treats human beings as brutes, stripping them of their sacred and inalienable Rights. From my inmost heart I reject and abhor that thing falsely called Religion, which stands dumb in the

presence of such outrages upon Humanity. No matter in what solemn garb it may be arrayed, what costly churches may be reared for its exercises, with what magnificence it may be upheld by the fashionable and the rich, it has my profound contempt. And in so saying, I take no credit to myself, as if I were peculiar in this respect, or had uttered any very elevated sentiment. I do not believe there is a man here present, unless every spark of human feeling be extinguished in his bosom, who, in his secret heart, does not feel precisely the same, does not know that that is a false Religion, a monstrous fraud upon man, a shameless mockery of God, that professes and maintains an absolute indifference as to whether the Rights of Humanity are observed or violated.

Thus believing, thus assured by an instinctive and irresistible conviction that you all recognize not merely the right but the sacred obligation of Religion, as it professes to serve God and love man, to concern itself with human Rights and Wrongs, it is a humiliating task to undertake to labor the point. And yet the cunning of human passions and interests which are so constantly and so easily hoodwinking us with mere words, renders it necessary. I can only wonder that we can be so befooled. I wonder at the palpable inconsistency into which we allow ourselves to be betrayed by such shallow verbal devices.

Let it be that the subject of Human Rights is a political subject, that this is the proper name for it, that it has no other. What then? Does it follow that Religion must not touch it because men have attached to it this designation? What are Human Rights? What are these two words but another name for the God-given power to live, to exercise the faculties of our nature as they were created to be exercised, to grow in knowledge and virtue and in Religion without let or hindrance from our fellows? And what is the special office of Religion but to guide us in the way of life and to cultivate our noblest powers? If, in things called political, there is no room for conscience, for rectitude, for honorable aims and dealings; if there is no exposure to falsehood, to dishonorable practices, to the betrayal of sacred trusts, to the sacrifice of manliness and integrity, why then, Religion has indeed no business with politics. But the light of day is not plainer than that the morality and the religion of mankind are deeply involved in what are termed political concerns. In fact there are no influences to which human beings are exposed, which are more corrupting than political influences, none that so degrade and harden men and make them base, none which more urgently require the counteraction of religious principles, faithfully applied to

public measures and institutions. There is nothing upon which the well-being of men more vitally depends than a conscientious, religious reverence for the Rights, and a profound sympathy for the Wrongs of men: a reverence and a sympathy pervading all minds. This is what human history tells us over and over again.

What a vast amount of suffering, in every age of the world, in every region of the earth, is caused by the neglect or violation of Human Rights! This is what the recital the other evening of the struggles and oppression of Modern Italy impressed upon me most profoundly. How could any one help seeing where the root of all that wretchedness lay. When we were told of the excruciating tortures inflicted upon human bodies,—such as, for instance, the running of sharp instruments between the nails of the fingers and the flesh, and the slowly wearing the life out under heavy chains, and when the vision was brought before us of those darkened and weeping homes, whose inmates were agonizing over the imprisonment of some father, brother, husband or son,—how could any thoughtful hearer help feeling of what indescribable importance it is that the people of that downtrodden land, the subjects of that horrible Neapolitan tyranny, should learn that religion does not

consist in counting beads and making the sign of the Cross, but in Justice, in Freedom, in a faithful and brave Humanity,—that these are the natural stuff for the conscience, the staple of all real Religion. Ah! the misery of it all is that the poor people have been taught that Religion has nothing to do with politics. *Mysteries and Politics*,—these are the two words, under the veil of which the devilish sorcery has been practiced, by which men have been robbed of every sacred right, and the corroding chains of spiritual and civil despotism have been fastened on their souls. The same infernal magic it is attempted to practice in our land in order to throw us into a death-like lethargy, so that wicked laws and oppressive institutions may flourish and spread. Thousands there are who have been so far stupefied by it that they are duped by the wild dream of the sanctity of a Religion which neither fears God nor regards man.

O ye women and children, watched over by a tenderness that will not let the summer wind visit you roughly, embosomed in those dear homes, around which all tender loves cluster, far away from the great noisy arena on which, under the name of politics, the conflict is going on between the brutal passions of men and the holy Rights of Humanity, O how my heart swells with unutterable prayer for the

ability to make it plain to you, to write in burning letters on your very hearts and consciences, that you have no more manifest duty than to revere those Rights, in the persons of the wretched victims of Oppression, the women and children wronged and crushed. While you excuse yourselves from this primal office of Religion, while you shut your hearts against your own flesh, on the miserable plea that it is a political matter with which you have nothing to do, know this, that by giving in to this monstrous fallacy, you are doing all you can, and it is not a little, to prepare the way of Oppression and make its paths broad and straight, right into your own households, those paths which are reddened with the blood of the noble and the innocent. In vain do you plead that you hate Injustice and Slavery. If you loved them with your whole hearts, you could not serve them more effectually than you are now doing by silence and indifference. This is all that they ask of you. All that they fear from you, is that you should speak out and act out the abhorrence which they naturally inspire.

Because you occupy no public position and command no large sphere of influence, you would fain believe that it concerns neither you nor your Religion, to take a hearty interest in human Rights and Wrongs.

You might believe so,—there would be some show of reason for this persuasion, if the influence of public injustice and organized Oppression never reached the still retreats of private life. But it is there, precisely there, within the quiet precincts of the domestic sphere, and among those farthest removed from the great official centres of political power,—it is there that the curses of War and Despotism fall most heavily, it is there that human hearts are wrung till they bleed and break. It is mothers, it is wives, it is sisters, it is tender children who are always the greatest sufferers. We are all too much in the habit of thinking that public evils, national sins, lie so far away from the private conscience and home, that as private persons we have nothing to do with them. It is a fatal mistake. Every instituted wrong shoots out influences, like so many living nerves to every part of the body politic, and the weaker parts are always sure to suffer the worst.

Such being the fact, the feeblest always being the victims of the strong, and the fact being vividly illustrated in the story of Italian Wrongs, I would to God I could communicate to your minds the deep impression I have received of the folly and falsehood with which, under the pretence that Religion has nothing to do with Politics, it is sought to render the private

conscience insensible to the profoundly religious nature of Human Rights.

My friends, in vain has the inspiration of the living God given us understanding, in vain are we put in full possession of all the potent privileges of Education, in vain is the mighty magic of the Press turning the world of human life into a God-written book, wherein he who runs may read the communications of Eternal Wisdom, in vain do we enjoy such bountiful means of spiritual growth, if our thoughts do not expand with a corresponding sense of power, if we still cling with childish dread of change to the narrow ideas which spiritual and political despots have set up as the unchangeable Truth, if we interpret Religion, the grandest principle and the most comprehensive, embracing all human interests, as a small occasional formality, and forbid it to take part, and a leading part, in settling the great questions of Humanity which the progress of the ages is bringing up. Unto us, how much is given, dominion over the mightiest forces of Nature. Physically, man is dilating to giant dimensions. He is converting the material Universe into his tool and bauble. In the name of God, let him not remain a dwarf in those most intimate respects in which he is made to reveal the image of the Infinite.

Above all things, as we would not shame our intelligence, let us not be scared away by mere words from the consideration of things pertaining to our very life. As God may be glorified—and we are commanded to glorify Him,—in our eating and drinking, as the highest motive that saint or angel can be moved by may be illustrated in such homely things as these, most assuredly the same divine rule of action may find room for its application in our social relations, and in the position that we occupy in regard to our brothers and sisters, enslaved, bought and sold.

If you would only imagine yourselves in *their* places, liable to have *your* parents, *your* husbands, *your* wives, *your* brothers and sisters, *your* children torn from you and sold away into a hard bondage, with no hope of meeting again in this world, I think it would so stimulate your understandings that you would instantly see clearly through the absurd and inhuman fallacy which asserts that Religion has nothing to do with what the Slave Power, in order to hide and protect itself from condemnation, chooses to call politics. I know full well that were I a slave and miserable, forbidden to call my wife and my children my own, liable to be chained and whipped and sold, the voice that should speak pity and hope would be holier to me in its accents than the

music of hymns and cathedrals, as sacred as the voice of an angel descending from God. In the eye that should be turned upon me with compassion, a light would beam, before which the light of the sun would grow dim. The hand that should be extended to loosen my chains,—would it not thrill me like the touch of the Lord Jesus? In his most blessed name, what on earth have the teachers and professors of his Religion to do, what are they here for, here, where that sacred blood has been shed for man, if not to fly to the relief of the oppressed and stand and maintain the precious cause of human Freedom, the outspoken opponents of all wrong.

But there were other thoughts that rose within me as I listened to the story of Neapolitan tyranny. I could not help feeling strongly that such things could never be if this country were only true to its own solemn and public Declaration of Human Rights. That the perpetrators of all that cruelty and injustice deem themselves amply justified in crushing out every spark of Liberty, is evident enough. What is Liberty in their estimation but bloody and boundless licentiousness? They conceive of it only as another name for massacre and anarchy. It is not merely that it threatens the power which they possess, and, as they

believe, directly from God. They may very honestly believe also that Liberty menaces the order and the very existence of society likewise. It cannot therefore be doubted that all, who are giving their support to the established forms of arbitrary government, hold themselves bound to quench the fire of Liberty, if need be, in blood, to keep no terms with it, to put it utterly out, even if it should require women and children to be shot down in the streets, and dungeons to be crowded with the noblest young men of the land.

And is it strange that they think so? Is it at all to be wondered at, that they take such severe measures to suppress the rising spirit of Liberty? Is it not very natural that that spirit should appear to them as the inspiration of the Evil One, an insane delusion, allowed in the mysterious providence of Heaven to seize men's minds, and, if not crushed, threatening to bring chaos back again? To the despotic Power which now crushes Southern Italy, I suppose the volcano that marks that region, and that is ever sending up its menacing smoke, furnishes only a faint image of the terrible sentiment of Freedom. How could it be otherwise? How can the advocates of Imperial Power look upon Liberty in any other light than as a wild, disorganizing force, to which, when once allowed full play, no limit can be put?

Have they not always before them the terrible memory of the bloody frenzy into which the attempt to realize the idea of Freedom threw the nation of France, the pale phantoms of a King and a Queen slaughtered, and a great company of the noble perishing on the scaffold, and the remembrance of God and Religion utterly renounced?

And when, from the revolutionary horrors of France, they cast their glances across the ocean to the new world, where, as it first seemed, the beautiful idea of Liberty was to become at last a beautiful fact, where it was declared in the beginning that all men are born free and equal, endowed with indefeasible Rights, such as Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness, when the despotic rulers of the old world, with the host of their retainers, look to this new world, what do they see? What is the amount of the freedom which is here professed to be realized? What is the spectacle we present?

The thing which we call Liberty, not only co-exists here with millions of human beings held in a bondage than which the sun has beheld none more abject, denied by law every human right, every sacred tie of marriage, or of kindred utterly disregarded, bought and sold like brutes, and hunted and shot down like wild animals;—Liberty, as it here

exists, not only quietly consorts with this inhuman servitude, it holds fast to the chains of the Slave as to its very life. It finds no footing for itself but upon the prostrate body of the African. And it cries aloud that it can maintain its existence only so long as it is allowed to buy and sell, and scourge and torture men and women. It makes a law for States calling themselves Free, which abrogates the express commandments of Christ and the plainest dictates of Humanity, forbidding, under pain of fine and imprisonment, food to be given to the famishing, or shelter to the houseless, and it pronounces this law the corner-stone of all Union and Peace. And it is even now gathering up its strength to reverse the law of the Most High and to extend these horrible wrongs far and wide over the whole continent, and to legalize the traffic in human flesh.

Such is the character of the Liberty illustrated by this nation which professes to rest upon the recognized Rights of Man. It is nothing but a horrible Despotism, rapidly throwing off all disguise. It is not worth one drop of Revolutionary blood. It is perfect madness to overthrow the established order of things in other and monarchical countries, if all that is to be realized is such a cruel mockery as this.

Is it any wonder that the Kings and Rulers of

Europe, seeing what our great experiment of self-government has come to—an experiment tried under the most favorable circumstances—in a new world,—account themselves fully justified before God and their own consciences in meeting every tendency to revolution with the sternest resistance, in shooting down hundreds to save the millions from the terrible Phantom of Liberty, which would lure them to universal ruin?

We are shocked at the story of foreign oppression. The King of Naples seems to us nothing less than a crowned monster of cruelty. And yet, he would tell us doubtless, just what all oppressors say: that we do not understand the matter, that what we denounce as inhuman is only a necessary severity whereby he saves his people from the bloody license called Liberty. And he, no doubt, is as greatly shocked in return at the horrors of American Slavery, now being published throughout the world, and overwhelming our boasted pretension to liberty with unutterable ridicule and shame.

Is it possible now that any thinking man can be so blinded by self-interest or pride as not to see that it is we who mock the world with our pretended Liberty, we who insist that Union and Public Prosperity can be preserved only by securing to one-half

the country the most oppressive instructions under the sun, that it is we who insist that the right to buy and sell human beings is as sacred as the right to buy and sell horses and oxen, we who build our national edifice on the violated Rights of Humanity, the Fugitive Slave Law being the chief corner stone,—that it is we who give strength to the arm, and sharpness to the sword of foreign oppression, furnishing kings and despôts with their strongest justification. It is we who have prepared the dungeons and forged the chains in which the noblest sons of renowned Italy languish. It is we who drive patriots and martyrs from home and country into weary exile. It is we who cause the tears of parents, wives, sisters and children to flow so bitterly. O how sadly we have disappointed the generous aspirations of our race for Freedom and Progress! We have blasted the hope of the world, and it lies withered under the feet of tyrants.

A few evenings ago, as I was requested, I introduced to a crowded assembly the lecturer of the evening,* who spoke on the subject of Woman. With what earnestness and power, he asserted the sacred rights of Humanity, those who heard him will not

* Rev. E. H. Chapin.

forget. On the same occasion, by request, I announced another Lecture to be delivered in the same place by a noble-minded woman from England, who asks sympathy for Italy, the native land of her husband. And there was yet another meeting which I was also requested to announce, a meeting called to enable another, an American woman with scarcely a trace of African blood, to buy herself out of Slavery. What a striking combination of announcements! What a fitting, I might also say, what a providential introduction to a Lecture on Woman! One woman comes to us from the other side of the Atlantic to plead for that great Cause in another land, in which the happiness of so many women,—mothers, wives, and sisters, is involved. And another, an American mother with her four little children mutely holds out her arms to us that we may take off her chains. From the first we hear the story of distant cruelty. The other is a living history, a present witness of our prejudice and inhumanity, of our guilt and shame.

Can such coincidences be, and we miss their significance? Can we any longer fail to perceive how our falseness, growing every day more glaring, paralyzes our influence and excuses the tyrant everywhere? We are feared for our increasing strength, but the music of Liberty that was to charm the world is lost

in the clanking of chains. We cannot speak a word for the great Human Rights which we are violating so grossly and with such deliberation.

If the Liberty we proclaim, instead of being a lying vision, were a reality, if our social order protected the weak instead of crushing them, what tongue could describe, what mind measure the moral power with which we should rule and revolutionize the nations! It could not be described. It could not be measured.

If we are ever to possess that blessed power, it will appear first of all in the private heart, in our homes and in our churches. Here where we acknowledge our relationship to the Highest, we must learn to feel for the Lowest. Here where you come to bless God for your kindred and friends, for your parents and children, you can offer no true thanks save from hearts glowing with sympathy for the parents and the children outcast, friendless, hunted and sold. May God render us sensitive to the divine touch of Nature which makes the whole world kin. Think, friends, how Heaven has heaped you with blessings, and here and now, in silence and in prayer give up your hearts to the ministrations of the Infinite Mercy. As you hope to receive it, that Mercy may you show!









